

TEACHING, WRITING, AND THE CRITICAL USE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Whether we are grade school or university teachers, we try to teach our students how to critically use technology, such as where to get and how to critically evaluate information, and how to weigh the possibilities and pitfalls of different communication mediums. Media and technological literacy is a necessary and productive part of our curriculum. But how often do we critically evaluate our own use and love of technology in our teaching?

Historian Ronald Wright (2004), in his engaging *Short History of Progress*, came up with the provocative concept of the *progress trap*. He criticizes our belief in the march of unremitting technological progress as an ideology, which is blind to certain flaws, leading to a seductive trail of successes that may end in a trap where we cannot survive without the technology. One of his best examples is the agricultural process. We expanded into billions of mouths to feed under the security of a very limited number of crops, which in the modern world only provide necessary yields with harsh chemicals and pesticides. But, there is of course, no going back without many of us starving, and hence, a progress trap.

I wonder if our use of (dependence on?) technology in teaching is not a smaller-scale progress trap in some ways? Recently, I took a continuing education course in “Writing for the Digital Age” and was surprised to hear from some of my fellow students of the near-death of cursive writing in some Ontario schools (on similar trends in the United States, see Downs, 2009). Despite the recognized benefits of cursive writing to student’s development, such as increasing their writing speed, fluency and the competence of note-taking (Christensen, 2004), students appear to be spending much less time on it. I have seen indications of this close to home. Every winter, I teach a course on the “History of Sport and Recreation” to approximately 100 students. Every time, I have about a dozen students who choose to print rather than handwrite their midterms and finals, despite the very real time pressures. And in every class I have a cohort of students who have such poor note-taking capabilities that they cannot keep up, no matter how slow I go and despite being given PowerPoint slides in advance with about two-thirds of the content filled in.

Of course, nowadays there is a broader curriculum that necessitates down-playing handwriting, and there have been decades of debate in the teaching of composition on how much contribution that cursive handwriting actually makes. However, much of the decline of handwriting in schools has been from a growing focus on electronic communication, word-processing and typing, and a belief that

there's no longer a need for skills like cursive writing (Schlagal, 2007). Has our love of computers, our belief in data processing as the future, become a trap where soon most of us will not be able to make effective notes on something if we lose our phones or our batteries die?

I include this as just one simple example of a situation where technology is perhaps becoming our master, where we are possibly straying into a progress trap with technology in education. I am no Luddite suggesting smashing the machines and going back to chalk and slate, but we do need to be critical of our incorporation of technology into education at all levels, aside from the concern that much technology is proprietary and weds us to a fix and replace cycle. Our students demand the latest bells and whistles (or is it stuff from Bell, and tweets?), and we ourselves have various passions for new, high-tech ways of doing things. However, we need to always ensure that we are bringing technology into the classroom to achieve educational outcomes, rather than because we are enamoured with the technology and its possibilities, with those becoming the ends in and of themselves.

References:

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